

## “Free.... to be”

Rev. Kristine Haig

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### Psalm 32

Happy the pardoned,  
whose sin is canceled,  
in whom God finds  
no evil, no deceit.

While I hid my sin,  
my bones grew weak  
from endless groaning.

Day and night,  
under the weight of your hand,  
my strength withered  
as in a summer drought.

Then I stopped hiding my sin  
and spoke out,  
“God, I confess my wrong.”  
And you pardoned me.

No wonder the faithful  
pray to you in danger!  
Even a sudden flood  
will never touch them.

You, my shelter,  
you save me from ruin.  
You encircle me  
with songs of freedom.

“I show you the path to walk.  
As your teacher,  
I watch out for you.

“Do not be a stubborn mule,  
needing bridle and bit  
to be tamed.”

Evil brings grief;  
trusting in God brings love.

Rejoice in the Lord.  
Be glad and sing,  
you faithful and just.

From the *Liturgical Psalter* © 1994,  
International Committee on English in  
the Liturgy, Inc. Chicago, IL: Liturgy  
Training Publications, 1995.

When I looked over the lectionary’s appointed texts for this morning the Psalm immediately grabbed my attention. The Psalms are sometimes referred to as “the prayerbook of the people,” but for some reason are rarely chosen by preachers to be the basis for the sermon.

Psalm 32 seems especially appropriate for us to reflect upon, however, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent – a season of self-examination and honesty about who we are (and aren’t).

Someone said that spiritual maturity consists in consenting to be where you really are. If anything in our tradition can help us in this, it’s the Psalter. Within the Psalms we can find every emotion, every virtue, and every flaw.

This particular Psalm is wonderful encouragement to be where we really are, who we really are : No secrets. (We may hide IN God, but not FROM God, or ourselves.)

The spiritual discipline of confession is, for us, a “means of grace.” In the Roman Catholic Church it is one of the sacraments. There is a lot to be said for that. In the act of absolute honesty and vulnerability there is the opportunity for grace, and transformation.

It is, in truth, a mystery.... a visible sign of an invisible reality. When we dare to tell the truth about ourselves, we make ourselves available to God’s healing Spirit.

Many congregations and pastors shun prayers of confession in the Sunday worship service. And – truth be told – many such prayers are indeed dreadful. Many are overwrought and idiosyncratic, as if they’d been written by an angst-ridden teenager locked in their room. Other prayers are so bland and minimalist that it makes you wonder, “Why even bother?”

You know the type:

“God, be patient with our unintended shortcomings,  
our failing to live up to our potential,  
our infrequent lapses....”

Really, is this the worst that’s going on with us?

Sometimes people eliminate the confession because they don’t want to “bum people out.” Confession can be such a “downer,” and we come to church to have our spirits raised! We’re especially concerned about “bringing down” that uniquely fragile group known as “Visitors” – the people who show up unannounced, apparently ready to leave and never come back if anything offensive is said during the service.

I suspect, however, that most folks who feel drawn to attend worship at an unknown congregation may be spiritually sturdier than most of the rest of us who are here in the pews week after week. Visitors, at least, seem to be searching for something, to be tugged at by God, and impelled by their need of grace.

Perhaps when we rankle at the prayer of confession, it’s because we’ve experienced it as coercive – being forced to “fess up” to other people’s sins, or being made to say that we are unworthy worms. I do recall a service or two where praying the Confession felt like being made to cry “Uncle,” with God (or the pastor) in the role of the bully.

**Adventures in New Testament Greek:  
*Metanoia***

*Repentance*, to be sure,  
but of a species far  
less likely to oblige  
sheepish repetition.

*Repentance*, you'll observe,  
glibly bears the bent  
of thought revisited,  
and mind's familiar stamp

—a quaint, half-hearted  
doubleness that couples  
all compunction with a pledge  
of recurrent screw-up.

The heart's *metanoia*,  
on the other hand, turns  
without regret, turns not  
so much *away*, as *toward*,

as if the slow pilgrim  
has been surprised to find  
that sin is not so bad  
as it is a waste of time.

— Scott Cairns, *Philokalia: New and Selected  
Poems*. Lincoln, NE: Zoo Press, 2002.

That's where Psalm 32 can be helpful, I think. Can remind us that confession isn't about cowering before a bullying God, but rather about finding refuge in a powerfully loving God. And so the Psalmist says,

“You, my shelter,  
you save me from ruin.  
You encircle me  
with songs of freedom.”

There is a wholeness, a freedom, that comes from daring to tell the truth about ourselves. How many of us can remember a time when we carried the burden of a secret? Perhaps it was a small secret, or perhaps a weighty one: a marriage going to hell, a business failure or a job lost, a son out of state and on drugs, a lovely daughter with an eating disorder, a spouse (or ourselves) addicted to online gambling or Internet pornography.

If we rounded up any random group of ten people, I bet we'd cover most of these circumstances. And that's not even considering those of us who are alcoholics.

We have met the addicts, and they is us.

We have met the people dying under the burden of shame, and they is us, too.

And perhaps the most tragic thing about our crushing secrets is that so many of us come to church and feel like we have to pretend that everything is fine.

Jesus said he came not for the righteous but for sinners, but when he shows up in church it's as if we say to him, “That's not me, Lord. I'm not the mess. I'm doing fine, thanks.”

German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, went so far as to say that our inability to be honest is the one insurmountable barrier preventing the church from really being Christ's community:

It is possible that Christians may remain lonely in spite of daily worship together, prayer together, and all their community through service — that the final breakthrough to community does not occur precisely because they enjoy community with one another as pious believers, but not with one another as those lacking piety, as sinners. The pious community permits no one to be a sinner. Hence all have to conceal their sins from themselves and from the community.

We are not allowed to be sinners....

In confession there takes place a breakthrough in community. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community.... Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid, sin poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and closed isolation of the heart.... Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all its power. Now the community bears the sin of the individual believer.... Now one is allowed to be a sinner and still enjoy the grace of God. He can confess his sins and in this very act find community for the first time.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, originally published 1939.

This isn't easy, this kind of vulnerable transparency. There's a reason why we are so prone to denial, so reluctant to look ourselves full in the face, preferring to fix our gaze on a more congenial view – say, someone else's sins!

Unfortunately, there's no healing in that. And precious little community.

I realize that every congregation is not a “safe space” for sharing secrets. Every parishioner is not a safe person. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we at least TRIED to be “safe” for each other? To be a place where we can dare to be sinners together – the people Christ came to, and said “Listen, here is good news!”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if people in our congregations lived in the kind of honesty that would enable them to give the kind of testimony that the Psalmists gave? To write things like the Psalmists?

Can you imagine that some day in the far off future, someone in a generation yet unborn, might read a testimony from us as powerful as the one we read this morning?

“While I hid my sin,  
my bones grew weak  
from endless groaning....  
Then I stopped hiding my sin  
and spoke out....  
and you pardoned me....  
You encircle me  
with songs of freedom.”

Free from our secrets, free from the deadly weight of our shame.  
Free from our loneliness, our isolation, and our inner darkness.

Free.... to be.

*Just to be is a blessing.  
Just to live is holy.*

— Abraham Joshua Heschel  
(1907-1972)

*This sermon was preached at the Shepherdstown (WV) Presbyterian Church on March 14, 2010.*

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